The Inquirer

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GRIST FOR THE MILL

"TO-DAY'S RELIGIONS"

By Carl R. Scovel

(Near this date, twelve months ago, the International Association for Religious Freedom, the I.A.R.F., met in Chicago. The conference discussed world religions. A young American Unitarian minister, Carl R. Scovel, was there. In an article in "The Unitarian Christian", an American publication, he is critical of it. We print below an extract from his article.)

THE people who came to Chicago set for themselves the task of rationally understanding each other's religions and beliefs. Towards this intellectual end they heard speeches from learned men and discussed ideas and problems among themselves. Perhaps what they did not realise was that they, among themselves, formed a religious and an inter-religious community. They were not only thinking, but actually living out the process of understanding. And, while they were talking about need for religious communication, they in their lives at the conference were beginning this very process of religious communication. Thus, I believe, the real value of the conference lay not so much in the speakers and the panels, but in the conference life—the actual daily give and take in intellectual discussions, and also in the thousand pedestrian details of community living. In the context of lectures and life, I think important conclusions may be drawn.

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There are differences, important differences, between religions. One cannot gloss over these differences with the benign generalizations of the myth of universal religion. They are real—they are there. For instance, Zafrulla Khan, speaker for Islam, continually quoted the Koran in support of the religious beliefs which he propounded. His whole idea seemed to be "It's in the book". In this case, the book was the Koran; we now know that not all the fundamentalists are within Christianity. Some people objected that Khan was not a true liberal. No, he is not. But he is what the Mohammedans would call a Mohammedan. And if we are to deal with the religion of Islam seriously, we must consider it in the light in which its adherents view it.

There has been a lot of easy eclecticism in vogue during these years, and if the Chicago conference did any one thing, it should have pointed out the futility and unreality of religious syncretism. We have seen several "universal religions" floating around, and the fact is that these "religions" simply do not deal seriously with the religions they propose to unite. Their idea of making several religions one religion is to take a bit from this faith and a bit from that—a symbol here and a symbol there—a rubric here and a rite there. At worst, these universal religions are an amalgamation of "golden rules" and other moral homilies.

But if one is going to select parts from various religions, we must ask by what standards one makes his selection. If a person chooses primarily those passages relating to social and moral duties, then he is primarily concerned with ethical behaviour. This, to him, is religion, and the various world faiths are only grist for his particular mill. If a person selects only those statements relating to the existence and power of God, he is primarily a universal theist, and, again, the religions are only useful in buttressing his particular point of view. If a person selects those statements and beliefs, emphasizing the depravity and incompleteness of man, then he is a fatalist first—a universal religionist, second. By and large the "universal religions" which I have seen, are more particular and narrow-minded than the religions which they hope to supersede.

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The first step for a person who hopes for a uniting of the world's faiths, is to understand each religion thoroughly. And to do this he must begin with one religion, and I would think that the best religion to start with is the religion of our Western culture, Christianity. We must avoid the charge of Emerson who said, "Thy charity abroad is spite at home". Unless a person can sympathetically understand the theology and worship of the Christian church, he has no chance of really understanding other religions. A person who denounces the Trinity as polytheism and nothing more, will be horrified by the pantheon of Hindu gods. A person who has no idea of the meaning of salvation through Jesus Christ cannot possibly grasp the significance of the Buddha in Mahayana Buddhism. How can a person who quickly calls a communion service a blood feast understand the services of sacrifice which the Hindus and Buddhists celebrate? The real point is that many people, admittedly not all, who profess an interest in universal religion, have no interest in the specific religions at all. They only wish to adorn their sect with the admirable slogan of being "universal". They are universal only in the sense that they hope the world will some day turn to them for salvation—and of course, here they are most unrealistic.

And so the people at Chicago found that there are differences between religions. The speaker for Buddhism was eloquent and charming, but I found some of his "Mind over matter" beliefs uncomfortably close to the teachings of Mrs. Eddy. The Christian church has tried to avoid this sort of thinking with its doctrine of the Incarnation. Again, I enjoyed the warmth and power of Rabbi Freehof's words, but, although I have attended services for the Passover and bar-mitz-vah, I never expect to be admitted to the religious community of Judaism. If we are to find our common ground, our likenesses, we must give equally serious attention to our differences.

GENTLEMEN AT GENEVA

IT would be improper for religion to obtrude upon the counsels of the Foreign Ministers at Geneva. The suggestion that it should, would bring an embarrassed smile to everyone. A place for everything, and everything in its place. But religion is desperately close to the counsels. It is like a ghost, cast out, which no one wishes to recognise and yet which everyone knows is there.

The gentlemen at Geneva are gentlemen; that is to say they are highly civilised men perhaps on a higher level of culture and ethical behaviour than many who send them there. They at least can be considered fairly representative of the decencies of the various countries in which they live. As private citizens they desire no man's destruction, they are kindly neighbours, and well-disposed towards their fellowmen. It may be supposed too that as private and public citizens they are as much concerned about the collective future of mankind as anyone else.

Yet these gentlemen, sitting at one another's tables, meeting in private conference, behaving towards one another, it may be presumed, as gentlemen should, agree to the following actions.

The Background

They agree without demur, as a necessary background for their work, that each of their states should have what is called an Intelligence service. It is the function of this service to spy, lie, deceive, make certain the ruin of a number of people, and occasionally carry out a surreptitious murder. The possession of this service of complete amoral or immoral action is never questioned by any of the civilised gentlemen, who meet in civilised conduct, neither is it questioned by the nations they represent.

The gentlemen are loyally devoted to their nations. That is why they are in Geneva. They probably could not live, move or have their being, without this loyalty. Without it, emotionally, they would be barren before all the winds that blow. And in this they are representative of the people who send them there. Yet within this loyalty each gentleman of Geneva is there to squeeze every possible advantage out of the other for the welfare of his state. To do this, of course, there must be give and take, but the prime duty is to take. It would be considered madness (and within the assumptions of the conference perhaps it would be) to give and not to take, to sacrifice and never count the cost. In this, in their position, they are exactly representative of the civilisations that send them there.

The Great Nations

Each gentleman is concerned with the possibility of the great nations they represent contriving their own destruction in the quickest possible time and by the most terrible means. They agree, with their peoples, that one of the glories of the human mind, the discovery of science, should be directed to this purpose. There is nothing odd or sinister about this, it does not keep them awake at night, nor does it prevent them from being gentlemen. And in this they are much the same as their own peoples.

So under the exterior of real kindly behaviour, being good to neighbours, making good fathers, husbands, brothers and uncles, willing to help anyone in distress they give assent to actions that, if carried out in private, would blast their personal lives, make social intercourse impossible, and if human life survived at all, would make it brutish, nasty and short.

The Ghost

It is a familiar dilemma, but familiarity does not drive away that ghost, haunting off stage, commonly called religion, which if brought into the counsels would hold under judgment all that the highly civilised gentlemen were doing and a great deal of the civilisations that sent them there.

The nature of the ghost is not easily found. There is little in ethical conduct, it must be assumed, that divides each of those men. One does not know how to be better than the other no matter what religious belief or lack of belief is held. In fact religious belief seems to have nothing to do with the situation at all.

What, then, brings the ghost in?

Jesus of Nazareth did not die upon the Cross primarily to make men more kindly towards one another. He died because of his communion with his Father in Heaven. Budda did not go to the jungle for seven years to obtain enlightenment, just because he wished men to be better husbands and brothers; he went because he desired to learn the secret of human existence. Socrates did not take the hemlock because he wished to make all men just and true, but because he believed that truth demanded that action of him.

In other words, everything that exists in what is called civilisation, according to these Founders of great religion, comes under the judgement of God, or Enlightenment, or Truth. That is the ghost. It must be kept off stage, for if it were brought on, all men and all that they do would be under judgment, and that is the fate that men do not wish to encounter. The sham ethics and the sham emotions would then have to go and very different Genevas would have to be accepted from those accepted now.

FROM MY JOURNAL

By Simplicitas

FOR as long as I can remember, the state of the church organ has been a recurrent item on our committee agenda. Last Sunday, in defiance of our many temporary repairs, it finally died on us, and at an emergency meeting tonight we had to decide what can be done. It is plain we must raise the money, for we have no funds to draw on. "But Mr. S." said our Miss Y anxiously, "we won't be owing for it, when it's done, will we? A church shouldn't keep its tradesmen waiting, even if other folks do." She opened her handbag and put a somewhat tattered savings bank book on the table. "I've £50 in here, Mr. S., borrow it, and if some more will do the same, we can pay our bill as Unitarians should. You can pay me back when the money's raised." In no time at all, offers of interest free loans were made round the table, and we'll be able to give the organ builders the shock of their lives. They'll learn that Unitarians pay twenty shillings in the pound, and on the dot!

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There are a number of names on every minister's visiting list, which would seem cease even to be names on the church roll unless one regularly visited them. Old N. is one of them. Born to Unitarian parents, and brought up in our Sunday School, I feel I have a pastoral duty to him, even though he never comes to church. Every three months I call and admire the new coat of paint he has put on his kitchen, or the progeny of his beloved rabbits. At my spring visit, he always embarrasses me by saying "I suppose you've come for your usual, Mr. S.", and hands over the ten shilling note already under the clock on the mantlepiece, and put down as his yearly subscription. There was consequently somewhat of a stir in the congregation this evening when N. actually turned up at service. I tried to greet him as if I saw him every Sunday, but the general surprise had evidently registered with him. "Everybody's surprised to see me, Mr. S. Well you see, you've so often come to see me, I thought it was about time I came to see YOU." He looked back into the vestibule to nod to the man who had once sat next to him in Sunday School. I wondered whether he noticed the rather old fashioned dado round its wall, which incorporates with many curlicues the words, "This is the house of GOD".

I think it is always a delicate matter to decide the balance of emphasis in one's sermons distributed over three months. There is only one aim, to help one's folk to a deeper knowledge of God, though this is accomplished in many different ways. They need sometimes to clear their thoughts, and that means sermons defining faith, and Divine immanence, and the like. Often we all of us need to rid ourselves of emotions that prevent our knowing God. We need to overcome fear, depression, temptation, and the rest. As Y. is always quick to remind me, we cannot love God fully until we love our fellows, so there must be sermons on love in action, loving our enemies, and arranging fair shares. Lastly I find room for a few sermons that open all our eyes to the glories of God about us, in the natural world, and in the lives of good men and women. It was a remark at the Fraternal today that set me jotting down these ideas. I realise I don't always check my emphasis as carefully as I might. It is so easy suddenly to drop on a new line of religious approach, and run it to the exclusion of the balanced teaching which a congregation needs.

THE INQUIRER
YOUTH SUPPLEMENT
BY THE UNITARIAN YOUNG PEOPLE'S LEAGUE

INTRODUCTION TO A CONFERENCE

By Donald Dunkley

THIS July, in the tiny Wirral village of Barnston, in Cheshire, will congratulate a hundred or so delegates to the 1959 I.R.F. Conference. The theme is the ever recurring one of the need to survey the history and development of liberal Christianity and liberal religion. Further, we want to try to work out a way toward a contemporary religious commitment despite differences of tradition or outlook.

Attending the conference will be members of the Liberal Religious Youth of America, being the united youth organisation of the Unitarian and Universalist churches, drawing members from churches across the continent and Canada. A group will fly to England from Switzerland from the Zwingibund, the youth movement of the liberal Protestant churches, and Zwingliana, the university groups. Others will come from Germany, from the Free Religious Youth Groups in the South, and a small group of the German Unitarian Youth in Hamburg, and there is a Dutch delegation mainly from the Free Christian Students and members of the Free Christian Youth Centre.

Some of the future leaders of the British Unitarian denomination will be at Barnston. The possibility of a broader vision, a deeper insight into the root problems and struggles of liberal religious peoples of such diverse standpoints, will fit them more certainly to be the mature and far seeing leaders that liberal religion requires.

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The future depends as never before, not on the survival of a local Unitarian community, but on the witness of thousands of liberals all over the world who show by their lives that tolerance and the respect of all views, and yet by an unswerving championing of freedom and reason in religion, that these virtues shall survive. As Unitarians, we often think of ourselves in our tiny chapels and churches hidden away in little known towns as a rather odd sect of ordinary people. We often feel in our isolation that the future of liberal religion depends largely upon the ups and downs of our own little cause, or if we are inclined to despair, on the shoulders of the apparently mythical group of people, in the capital, called the G.A.

We labour under the illusion that all the other Unitarian churches in our denomination carry on just in the same way as our chapel; that they all believe in roughly the same beliefs, sing the same sort of hymns, and run identical services. And so too do we often paint, with the same brush, all the other congregations of people who come under the general handing of "Liberal Religious Movements Abroad" in G.A. Year Book.

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Infrequently we meet a stranger from a cause in some distant country, or ambassador from a foreign denomination. We are awed by what they tell us of their way of being religious liberals. We feel uncomfortable and insecure that such oddities should be performed in our churches. But then these are exceptions, we think; and thus we comfort ourselves and return quickly to our own orderly, tradition-born way of Unitarian life.

Yet the liberal religious movement both at home and abroad is not a narrow, doctrinaire, single-tradition approach to religion. It is a diverse and manifold spirit of freedom and tolerance in religious matters springing up among individuals and churches of many climes, traditions and histories. And if we are to work together in our several ways for the liberty in religion that we all cherish, we have to learn to understand the profound differences that we agree to tolerate as well as those values which we work together to spread and make strong.

Correspondence

Letters should be addressed to the Editor, "The Inquirer", 14 Gordon Square, London, W.C.1. They should not in general exceed three to four hundred words in length.

Unitarian Architecture

Sir: Well spoken, James Ashcroft! There is only one possible architecture for Unitarianism: good modern architecture by the best modern architects available. Your local association of architects should be able to tell you who to approach.

The aims of architects who believe in the modern movement are precisely parallel to those that we Unitarians profess, namely: to express up-to-the-minute truth, warmed by human love and beauty, in the design, planning and structure of the buildings with which they are entrusted. Up-to-the-minute truth does not mean "Georgian" pediments, "Colonial" fleches or "Classic" columns. When building committee members begin to see that the "Styles" of architecture are the same as the dogmas they shun, fixed and sterile, we may at last see a modern Unitarian church.

Yours, Hugh Blake, A.R.I.B.A.

Bristol

News Review

A New Beginning

MOSSLEY. Over the past few years there has been a noticeable renewal of life at the Christian (Unitarian) Church. It reached a climax on the 4th and 5th July, when a special weekend was held in honour of their Lay Pastor, Mr. Derek Smith, who recently attained ministerial status. The Saturday was devoted to a Gift Day, when the minister sat outside the church for twelve hours to receive members' contributions, accompanied by the ladies of the congregation who served coffee during the day in true continental style. A feature of great interest was the poster containing a musical scale which registered by the use of notes, the amount raised at different times during the day. The amount raised was £107. On the Sunday evening, instead of the customary Induction Service a "Fellowship Greetings Service", conducted by the Mayor of Mossley, was held in which seven messages—four written and three tape-recorded—from prominent personalities in the movement were addressed specifically to different sections of the Church life. This form of service proved a most moving occasion for the congregation which numbered over 150. Perhaps the most touching event of the whole weekend came when the Chairman

continued on page 224

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GENERAL ASSEMBLY STAFF APPOINTMENT

A vacancy will occur at the end of August for a Shorthand-typist to act as secretary to the Rev. D. E. Richards and Mr. S. Hellen. Any young lady is asked to communicate with the Secretary of the Assembly, Essex Hall, Essex Street, London, W.C.1, stating age and qualifications. Luncheon vouchers are issued and a Staff Pension Scheme is operated.

This is a permanent post in which the occupant can render valuable service to our movement.

THE INQUIRER

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continued from page 223

of the congregation, Mr. F. Tarr, presented the Rev. D. Smith with a preaching gown, and Mrs. Smith with a book token, as an expression of the congregation's appreciation of the work they have done for the cause over the past two years. Under the leadership of its now fully qualified minister, the congregation faces the future with optimism.

Gateacre

On Wednesday evening, July 1st, a United Women's Service was held in Gateacre Chapel, Liverpool. This lovely old chapel which has stood in Gateacre Village since 1700, was filled to capacity with representatives from the following churches:

Gateacre Parish Church of St. Stephen.
Woolton Parish Church of St. Peter.
St. James' Methodist Church, Woolton.
The Congregational Church, Speke.
The Congregational Church, Woolton.
The Congregational Church, Huyton.

together with Unitarians from Mill Street, Hope Street, Speke and Gateacre.

The Preacher was Mrs. M. G. Willcock, a past National President of the Women's Free Church Federal Council, and a member of Manor Road Methodist Church, Wallasey. The service was conducted by Mrs. S. R. Butler, of Gateacre, and Lessons were read by Mrs. Rogers of Woolton Methodist Church, and Mrs. J. Waddington of Speke Congregational Church. The organ was played by our own Gateacre Chapel Organist, Miss I. Houghton. The Offertory was in aid of the Inter-Church Aid Refugee Fund, and amounted to £6.

Plymouth

The Church was well filled on the occasion of the dedication of the new mural painting, at the evening service on 12th July. The mural was executed by Mr. J. Pickup, the teacher of mural painting at The Plymouth School of Art. It occupies a panel from floor to ceiling facing the congregation, and represents Christ commanding the storm on the lake. The Rev. John Kielty, who conducted the service, spoke of the inner peace achieved by the spirit of Jesus; a spirit which could also bring peace to a stormy world, if we had more faith in the things which came first in the religion of Jesus.

Mr. Kielty spent the weekend at Plymouth and, in addition to conducting the two Sunday services, he attended a Congregational meeting on the Saturday evening and contributed much helpful advice to the discussion on the affairs of the congregation.

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Yorkshire Unitarian Union

At the Quarterly Meeting of the Delegates of the Yorkshire Unitarian Union on July 4th, 1959, at Leeds, the following Resolution was carried unanimously:—

"That this meeting of delegates of the Yorkshire Unitarian Union supports the Resolution of the Congregational Union Assembly (1959) in that it opposes any changes in the 1944 Act that would make available to the Churches large grants for the building of new denominational schools."

Copies of this Resolution are being sent to the Minister of Education and to the Members of Parliament for those constituencies in which member churches of the Union are located.

Brighton

The Annual Outing of the Brighton Congregation is always a happy occasion, and this year new ground was broken when some thirty members and friends visited Penshurst Place, the former home of Sir Philip Sidney. Tea was served at a hotel in Tonbridge. The weather on June 27 was ideal, and the outing was voted one of the most successful for many years.

Alice Hall

The last link of the direct connection of a greatly honoured family with the Unitarian Chapel, Boston, was broken by the death, on June 30th, of a devoted member who had rendered great service to the cause, Miss Alice Hall, the younger sister of the late Dr. Alfred Hall. She was a retired day school teacher, as was also her sister, Elizabeth, who predeceased her last December, about a fortnight before the passing of Dr. Hall. She died at Harlow Wood Hospital, Mansfield, and her body was cremated at Nottingham on July 4th, the Revs. H. Hall and K. Sherratt officiating. Her ashes were later interred in the grave of her mother and father.

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